

Greeting of Pope Francis

on the Occasion of the Opening of the Annual Catholic Charities USA Gathering

Charlotte, North Carolina October 5, 6, 7, 2014

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, I send you my warmest greetings of peace and abundant joy as you gather together in Charlotte, North Carolina, to celebrate the work and ministry of Catholic Charities in the United States of America. I really like your theme: "Setting the Pace: Changing the Course." That really fits in with what I want to share with you today.

As I wrote in *Evangelii Gaudium*, "The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus (par. 1)." That encounter with the Lord Jesus sets our pace; it changes the course of our lives.

As Jesus called the Apostles and the early Church to "follow" Him, the course of their own lives changed. The early Church witnessed that change of pace and called for a new way to relate to each other and serve the "least of these." The Gospel message of Matthew gave the true "course" to follow: 'Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers (and sisters) of mine, you did for me.' (MT 25:40).

The early Christian community took that message and encounter to heart. They modeled a new way of being, charting a new course in a world that seemed uncaring. We hear that "The community of believers was of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they had everything in common . . . There was no needy person among them, for those who owned property or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds of the sale, and put them at the feet of the apostles, and they were distributed to each according to need." (Acts 4:32, 34-35)

Again, that joy encountered by the disciples of Jesus -- both then and today -- leads one to act in ways that can turn heads and hearts. It really changes the course of our lives. Like in the story of the Good Samaritan, we are called to be like that Samaritan who stopped on his busy journey to care for his "neighbor," and more so, we are called to be like the "inn-keeper" (LK 10:35) remaining open to heal and provide a safe place for on-going care. We are called today to respond in the same way. We are called to be in the "streets" inviting and serving those who have been left out. We see the "image of God" in each person's eyes.

I noted in my Apostolic Exhortation that "Human beings are themselves considered consumer goods to be used and then discarded. We have created a 'throw away' culture which is now spreading. It is no longer simply about exploitation and oppression, but something new. Exclusion ultimately has to do with what it means to be a part of the society in which we live; those excluded are no longer society's underside or its fringes or its disenfranchised -- they are no longer even a part of it. The excluded are not the 'exploited' but the outcast, the 'leftovers'." (EG, par. 53) They are leftovers, they are surplus. No one is to be a "leftover." No one is to be "excluded" from God's love and from our care.

As Catholic Charities workers, board members, donors, parish social ministers, volunteers and organizations, you bring that joy with each and every encounter you have. I know that the work that you do in the United States of America in Catholic Charities in your local dioceses, and on the national level, on behalf of the poor person, the lonely single, the elderly shut-in, the young family, the homeless adult, the hungry child, the refugee youth, the migrant father, and so many others, allows them to know and experience the tremendous and abundant love of God through Jesus Christ. You are the very hands of Jesus in the world. Your witness helps to change the course of the lives of many persons, families and communities. Your witness helps to change your heart.

My predecessor, now Saint John Paul II, visited your annual gathering back in 1987, in San Antonio, Texas. At that meeting, he exhorted Catholic Charities of the United States to "Gather, transform, and serve!" He continued: "When (this is) done in the name of Jesus Christ this is the spirit of Catholic Charities and all who work for this cause, because it is the faithful following of the one who did not come to be served but to serve."

He in effect called upon you to first serve those in need by taking "direct action to relieve their anxieties, and to remove their burdens, and at the same time lead them to the dignity of self-reliance." Secondly, "Service to the poor also involves speaking up for them and trying to reform structures which cause or perpetuate their oppression." Finally, what you are doing here today -- gathering together persons and communities to do the same -- must continue in all your work.

I am grateful and give God praise and thanks for the great work that you do every day in Catholic Charities in the United States of America. I know that you are in the streets caring for the people in need through all your works of charity and justice.

Here I repeat for all the Church what I have often said: Going out on the streets you can have an accident, but staying locked in will make you ill. I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security." (EG, par. 49) You are the engine of the Church that organizes love -- Caritas -- for all believers to work together to respond through the corporal works of mercy. You set the pace for the Church to be in the world each day. You help others change the course of their own lives. You are the salt, leaven and light that provides a beacon of hope to those in need. You as Catholic Charities USA help to change the course of your local communities, your states, your country and the world by your witness to that encounter with the Lord Jesus, who gives us abundant life and joy. The joy of serving and, advocating for the good of all continues that call of the early Church to make sure that all needs are met.

I ask that you see your leadership as service; that you practice mercy which is a core Christian message for us; and that you keep the poor always before you, in all that you do. They will precede us into the Kingdom of Heaven, they will open the gates for us. We are called to be a church, a people of and for the poor.

I also ask you to pray for me because I need it. I bless you with all my heart.